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Dale Barbour. *Winnipeg Beach: Leisure and Courtship in a Resort Town, 1900-1967.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2011. xiii + 211 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-88755-722-4.

Reviewed by Greg Di Cresce

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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

The popular song "Summer Nights" from the musical *Grease* recounts, in dialectical fashion, a young heterosexual affair at the beach in the late 1950s.[1] In delightful interplay of form, content, and expression, the song cheekily relays a polysemous message designed in part to cast a critical eye on social attitudes toward youth culture, particularly those tied to sexual identities. Through the potent juxtaposition of gender, class, and ethnicity, the song playfully uses tensions in these social categories to evoke a nostalgic "summer dream" space, a boundary zone in which differences seemingly melt in warm nights of young love. But by dividing the song so it is sung in a back-and-forth manner by the male lead to an all-male chorus and by the female lead to an all-female chorus, an overarching discourse of heterosexuality is being stamped upon this summer leisure zone. However, because it is done with such insistence, it signals that heterosexuality might not just be under threat but be a fluid identity. A message likely not lost on early 1970s audiences, when the musical debuted.

While no one is going to confuse the boardwalk of Winnipeg Beach for Rydell High School, that does not mean that performances similar to "Summer Nights," with slightly different production values, did not regularly occur in the resort town eighty kilometers (fifty miles) north of Winnipeg. Thanks to Dale Barbour's entertaining and thoughtful monograph, one gets the chance to hear what youthful heterosexual romance and its accompanying homosocial policing sounded like off Broadway.

Barbour's chief contention is that the way Winnipeg Beach was spatially constructed during the first half of the twentieth century created a "safe space" where "summer dreams" might come true, "if only briefly and if only in a controlled manner" (p. 18). He identifies and maps a series of cultural intersections--nature and urban space, land and water, ethnic groups, and different classes--that crisscrossed this beach community, coding at least parts of it as anomalous regions where limited gender challenges could occur. He claims, as other historians of amusement have, that such

seaside destinations (Coney Island, Blackpool, etc.) channeled and adapted preindustrial carnival traditions. These midways on or by the beach were commercialized play spaces made for the masses, where they were able to vent off the pressures of modern, urban living; strengthen the bonds of established communities; and, to some degree, test out new social maps. While Barbour finds all this at Winnipeg Beach--much of it mediated by the entrepreneurial aspirations of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR)--he stresses that the resort's "energy" came from men and women looking for a good time. But, one could suggest, that energy might have been the result of a beach composed of so many active cultural fault lines. As Barbour observes: "By acting as a boundary point between so many divides, Winnipeg Beach was in many ways a place where things could be turned upside down." He adds that it was "a place where men and women might be themselves and become themselves" (p. 18).

A generous backdrop is unfurled in the historical analysis of the formation of this pleasure site. Barbour sees reflected in the development of Winnipeg Beach the tension between a more genteel middle-class approach to leisure and a more industrialized, commercialized, and rough-and-tumble working-class one. He observes different ethnic communities trying to make themselves whiter. He notes the influences of mass production and mass consumption in reorganizing gender relations. He factors in the emergence and development of a distinct youth culture. And he emphasizes how the resort adapted to the changes in the Anglo-American systems of courtship from calling to dating to more sex-centered courting.

Woven into and interacting with these international processes, Barbour examines how they were translated when they crashed into Winnipeg Beach. To do this, he spatially deconstructs the beach into three zones: the transportation corridor; tourism infrastructure; and the amusement area or leisure zone, "the heart of Winnipeg Beach" (p. 97). A chapter is dedicated to each zone. The interplay of each zone comprises the Winnipeg Beach experience. To try to bring to life these experiences, he taps diverse sources. He acknowledges that none are unmediated windows to the past. Along with the usual suspects--newspapers, advertisements, photographs, literary accounts, etc.--Barbour relies heavily on his interview subjects' memories and previous oral history projects. Radio, a medium embraced by many beach communities, probably would have been a source worth exploring as well.

But to return to the fascinating way that those global forces took shape in Winnipeg Beach, it is the dynamics of race and ethnicity that stand out. What we find on Barbour's boardwalk is a space predominantly free of ethnic and racial conflict. The physical absence of First Nations people from the beach and a colonial mindset allowed racism to remain masked in more abstract and subtle forms, such as suntans. Ukrainians, Poles, Icelanders, and Jews could, in their healthy tans, share with English Canadians not only a class position, but also a sense of whiteness. This shared whiteness came in the choice of getting a "tan which would do credit to a plains Indian" (p. 103). Such "othering" tactics basically appeared to create an oasis from ethnic tension. This despite the period of 1914 to 1920 being described by one prominent Winnipeg historian as a time when "ethnic discrimination was rampant; foreigners lost their jobs, were disenfranchised and deported; property was destroyed; lives were threatened. Most important of all, the events of these years left scars on the tissue of Winnipeg society that took decades to heal."[2]

Presumably, Barbour sees Winnipeg Beach as a site where Winnipeg society went to heal itself. This is certainly the general impression he says he received from his interviewees, who appear to have a somewhat "Folklorama" memory of their trips to Lake Winnipeg. Conveniently for Barbour, whose protagonists are young adults, this permits

him to largely place race and ethnicity in the bleachers and focus more freely on the tensions of youth culture, gender identity, and those summer nights.

Notes

[1]. Created and written by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, *Grease Lightening*, later shortened to *Grease*, debuted in Chicago in 1971. The next year it came to Broadway and, in 1973, to London. It has been revived numerous times and was made into a film in 1978. “Summer Nights” appears in the second scene. For more, see Scott Miller’s *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll, and Musicals* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2011).

[2]. Alan Artibise, *Winnipeg: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1977): 126-128.

The song has undergone several rewrites, as the raw and raunchy edges of this rock and roll musical were filed to appeal to broader audiences. For example, Betty Rizzo, one of the young women in the female chorus, responds with a shrug to Sandy Dumbrowski’s idyllic summer romance by saying, “’Cause he sounds like a drag.” This was apparently originally written, “’Cause he sounds like a fag,” to convey Rizzo’s impression of the young man who barley touched Sandy all summer.